

WN *Editorial*

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The public interest. Knowledge, decision...

Let's include action

In May last year, World Health Organization director-general Margaret Chan addressed the 8th global conference on health promotion in Helsinki. She stated:

Efforts to prevent non-communicable diseases go against the business interests of powerful economic operators....It is not just Big Tobacco any more. Public health must also contend with Big Food, Big Soda, and Big Alcohol. All of these industries fear regulation, and protect themselves by using the same tactics.

Research has documented these tactics well. They include front groups, lobbies, promises of self-regulation, lawsuits, and industry-funded research that confuses the evidence and keeps the public in doubt. Tactics also include gifts, grants, and contributions to worthy causes that cast these industries as respectable corporate citizens... They include arguments that place the responsibility for harm to health on individuals, and portray government actions as interference in personal liberties and free choice.

This is formidable opposition. Market power readily translates into political power. Few governments prioritise health over big business. As we learned from experience with the tobacco industry, a powerful corporation can sell the public just about anything. Let me remind you. Not one single country has managed to turn around its obesity epidemic in all age groups. This is not a failure of individual will-power. This is a failure of political will to take on big business.

The will and the way

Political will is not owned by politicians, who usually act only in response to consistent and compelling pressure. So where is the will, and what is to be done?

Contributions in this issue of *World Nutrition* state or imply the need for direct action to protect population health, especially of children, with laws that restrict or prohibit ultra-processed products, including soft drinks. In doing so we salute the Mexican *El Poder del Consumidor* (Consumer Power) and *Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria* (Alliance for Healthy Food) movements, led and convened by Alejandro Calvillo. An essential part of their work, and a necessary reason for their success, is direct action. In this they

work in the same way as the global breastfeeding movements such as the International Baby Food Action Network and the World Alliance for Breastfeeding Action. By 'action' here is meant more than thinking, investigating, writing, or speaking. It means direct action, which is often irrevocable, always involves danger and risk, and which changes the lives of those who commit themselves.

The practice of action

All significant improvements in public health go to prove two rules. One is that these always involve the use of law. Two is that they always involve action. There are no exceptions as yet known to these rules. They may apply to public affairs generally. Actions and laws are not the whole story. Evidence is always needed. But this is never enough. Change of what is rotten, and also preservation of what is good, always involves decisions to act, personally and on behalf of others in the forms of laws – which are known as Acts.

The classic example in public health is that of John Snow. In 1854 he became sure why cholera was spreading in the Soho area of London. He did not stop at publishing his meticulous maps of incidence and correlation, or at writing memoranda and reports expressing urgent concern. He arranged removal of the handle of the pump in Broad Street that supplied the water he believed to be contaminated. This action worked.

Its significance was much more wide-ranging. Powerful forces were ranged against the public health leaders in Europe, the US and elsewhere, as they campaigned to persuade politicians to pass laws to construct immense closed sewage systems, which made cities safe from epidemics of water-borne diseases. The forces against public health included privately-owned water companies committed to their profits and stockholders, and politicians – some with links to the water companies – who believed in private enterprise and in people's freedom of choice to expose themselves to risk of cholera and typhus. The political implication of John Snow's direct action is that water is a public utility, which must be funded with public money and managed in the public interest. After titanic campaigns, so it became. Times have changed since.

Another example is the 1930 march in India of nearly 400 kilometres (240 miles) to the ocean at Dandi led by Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, whose immediate purpose was to defy the British imperial rulers' monopoly and tax on salt. The march grew to 60,000 people, shown in newsreels and reported throughout the world, including front page news stories in *The New York Times*. On arrival at the Dandi shore, Gandhi gathered mud, boiled it, and made salt. Then and later, the police clubbed down thousands of unresisting marchers with steel-tipped batons. Over 50,000 people, including Gandhi, were imprisoned. He became *Time* magazine 'man of 1930', being compared with the direct actors of the 'Boston Tea Party' who sparked the uprising that led to the creation of the USA. After his release he negotiated with the British Viceroy on equal terms.

Practically everybody now reveres Mohandas Gandhi, but perhaps without digesting the nature and significance of his actions. In common with thinkers and actors throughout history, he believed that unjust laws – or lack of laws – must be challenged, and when necessary overturned. His choices of campaigns were always inspired by knowing what would touch ordinary people in their everyday lives, raise their consciousness, and thus make them active citizens. The monopoly and tax on salt, once confronted, became a symbol of a rotten state that must be replaced. He developed the form of civil disobedience known as *satyagraha* ('truth-force'). This involves manifestations in which laws are broken. Like other fathers of their nations, he made clear that he was inciting others to break laws that he stated were wrong, and was regularly imprisoned.

The duty of action

In human affairs there come times where direct action is justified, and where failure to act is wrong. 'All that is necessary for the triumph of evil, is that good men do nothing', said the 18th century Irish conservative politician Edmund Burke. (He would say 'people' now). So has the point now been reached when direct action is needed, to improve the state of public health nutrition throughout the world? Its state is bad, for sure. UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier de Schutter has been saying so repeatedly. So has Anand Grover, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health. Last month, as quoted by the office of the UN commissioner for human rights, he stated to member states at the UN General Assembly:

Challenging the world to get serious about the battle against 'junk food,' a UN health expert today called on all countries to urgently adopt measures that promote the availability ... of healthy foods...[He] blamed junk food – ultra-processed and ready to eat, but energy-dense and containing 'empty calories' devoid of nutritional value –for the global obesity epidemic, and urged the international community to deal with the alarming increase in deaths from diet-related diseases... He warned delegations about disturbing figures, according to which 2.1 billion people worldwide are overweight or obese, and at least 2.8 million die every year because of their weight. "The culprit is "junk food". Containing high levels of sugar, salt, trans-fats and saturated fats, this "junk" has unfortunately replaced healthy foods in our diets.'

As paraphrased, he goes on to identify drivers of this rotten state as including 'market consolidation by transnational companies and supermarket chains, skewed foreign direct investment, [and] aggressive advertising of ultra-processed foods'. He states:

Changes in the food system are now largely driven by transnational corporations, including food and beverage companies and supermarket chains, which have altered diets from traditional and minimally processed foods to ultra-processed ones.

Part of this statement is vague. What does 'challenging the world' mean? What or who is 'the international community'? And when 'all countries' are called on urgently to adopt measures, the reference obviously is to governments, but who will encourage politicians and officials to act in the public interest, now and for future generations?

Those in Mexico – and now throughout the world – who work with and in support of *El Poder del Consumidor* and *Alianza por la Salud Alimentaria*, have made up their minds on questions such as these. Thus, they take responsibility for acting on the judgement that the rocketing rates of obesity and diabetes in Mexico are caused by *comida chatarra* (rubbish food). They have decided that the evidence is conclusive.

The focus of the Mexican campaigners is the advertising and marketing of ultra-processed food products, including soft drinks, to children. They identify as outrageous the policies and practices of the makers and caterers of *comida chatarra*, with all their supporting agents and industries. They use print, broadcast, electronic and social media. Their campaigns go beyond childhood. They include posters showing diabetic people who are blind or have limbs amputated, which state the reasons why.

Corporations are not partners

In her Helsinki address, Margaret Chan identified two disturbing trends. The second is

Efforts by industry to shape the public health policies and strategies that affect their products. When industry is involved in policy-making, rest assured that the most effective control measures will be downplayed or left out entirely. This, too, is well documented, and dangerous. In the view of WHO, the formulation of health policies must be protected from distortion by commercial or vested interests.

She spoke after a *Lancet* paper, in its series on chronic non-communicable diseases with the arresting title ‘Profits and Pandemics’, was published. Its authors conclude

Legislation for clean air, asbestos, road trauma, and tobacco was introduced only after the repeated failures of the industries responsible for solving these problems through self-regulation... Regulation, or threat of regulation, is the only way to change transnational corporations.

Like the tobacco industry, the manufacturers and purveyors of *comida chatarra* – ultra-processed products, or junk food for short – have forfeited the right to be partners. They must be excluded from all processes designed to make policy decisions and then to take actions in the public interest. In these matters scientists need now to be citizens and activists too, as is now happening on behalf of Mexico. All those with special knowledge of and interest in public health, now need to denounce what is happening, clearly, strongly, again and again. This too is now happening.

Being polite and writing notes of concern does not work. All concerted responses that fall short of direct action, and that overlook the need for laws that protect the public interest, never work. Public goods including public health remain privatised. The determining factor of world food systems and supplies remains uncontrolled corporate power. This is indeed formidable opposition. The handle remains on the pump.

The editors